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*Fort Apache, the Bronx* Essay

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Two cops on the job greet a beautiful young prostitute as she walks over to their

window, pulling out a hidden pistol and shooting them both in cold blood. This is

one of the key scenes in Daniel Petrie’s film Fort Apache, the Bronx (1981)

starring Paul Newman taking place in the 41st precinct and depicting the South

Bronx as being the most crime ridden and unsafe place to live in NY. However,

police statistics from 1978 to 1980 are divergent with this idea. In fact, during this

period, other police precincts, such as those in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant,

were more crime ridden than the 41st. Petri’s film obfuscates crime and social

climate within the South Bronx. The protagonist of *Fort Apache, the Bronx* is an

18 year former veteran cop, Murphy (Paul Newman) whose main focus is being

faithful to the law as well as keeping a healthy social conscience. Within the 41st

precinct, cops called their station “Fort Apache”(Native Indian reference)

indicating that they felt like they were in some sort of army outpost stationed in

foreign territory. Cop brutality is one major focus in this film. In one scene

Murphy witnesses another cop throw an innocent Puerto Rican off a roof and

expects the incident to be swept under the rug. The production of this film led to

many riots from residents living in the Bronx who were deeply offended. Paul

Newman in one interview mentions that “This film isn’t racist, it is only tough on

Puerto Ricans, Blacks and the neighborhood but the true villains revolve around

Cop Brutality.” This claim is either an attempt to excuse the films depiction, or

naivety to the extreme. Paul

Newman fails to see that *Fort Apache, the Bronx* over exaggerates the true

nature of the South Bronx. Amidst all the hype about the film *Fort Apache, the*

*Bronx* community leaders such as Richie Perez did not appreciate the image

portrayed in the film. Richie Perez states in one of his articles on *Fort Apache,*

*the Bronx* in the nine months preceding the first announcements that the film

was going to be shot in the South Bronx; twelve unarmed Puerto Ricans in New

York City were shot or beaten to death by cops. The committee against Fort

Apache (CAFA) took many steps to halt the production of this film, and believed

that a massive movement would have hope of having any effect. At one point

they were able to get hold of the films script and discovered that not one role of a

South Bronx resident in the film were anywhere near decent. Eventually CAFA

filed a $1 billion lawsuit against the film knowing that they would not win but also

knew that it would draw the film makers out for public debate and would receive

considerable publicity. Petri’s film is wrong in singling out the South Bronx as an

extreme and crime ridden environment considering that there is little difference

between the 41st precinct and other areas. In fact, the South Bronx statistics

aren’t as outrageous as other locations in NY such as Harlem and Bedford

Stuyvesant for example. Through 1978 to 1980 the number of crimes in Harlem

and Bedford Stuyvesant fairly outranks the South Bronx crime statistics.

Throughout the year of 1979 for example, the South Bronx had 33 cases of

Murder/Non negligible manslaughter, 46 cases of Forcible rape, 742 cases of

Robbery and 293 cases of felonious assault. On the other hand Bedford

Stuyvesant had 75 cases of Murder/Non negligible manslaughter, 101 forcible

rapes, 1145 robberies and 640 felonious assaults. Harlem also outranks the

South Bronx in crime statistics throughout this year as well as in 1978 and 1980.

The statistics clearly show that the South Bronx is not nearly as worse as other

locations in New York such as Harlem or Bedford Stuyvesant. CAFA most

certainly had a right to stand up for their community in this case, because they

knew that their community was being portrayed and depicted unfairly. Knowing

all of this, it is very strange to single out the South Bronx as the most crime

ridden and unsafe place to live in NY. One can only say that Daniel Petrie’s film

obfuscated crime and social climate within the South Bronx.

Work cited:

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